

CHAPTER ONE



Skepticism and the Politics of Domination

Let us begin with our fears. How might the skeptic's reasoning lead to an entirely amoral politics, or to use Nietzsche's expression, to affirm that "everything is permitted"?¹ As we have observed, the arguments tying skepticism to illiberalism agree that doubt corrodes beliefs that are necessary to sustain liberalism. Skepticism undermines faith in the value and justifiability of a liberal democratic way of life as well as the ability to defend it against those who oppose it. It thus prepares the way for illiberalism both by freeing the will from moral restraint and by giving no principled reasons to raise against such opponents. Nietzsche is the most important figure in the history of political thought to consider this question, but he is not the only one. Several other thinkers are also often interpreted as uniting skepticism with an absolutist politics: Machiavelli, Descartes, and Charron. And so before we turn to Nietzsche we shall begin with them.

Machiavelli and Descartes

One reading of Machiavelli may seem to lead exactly to this conclusion linking skepticism and a politics of domination. In chapter XV of *The Prince*, Machiavelli claims he is "departing from the orders of others" for

It has appeared to me more fitting to go directly to the effectual truth of the thing than to the imagination of it . . . it is far from how one lives to how one should live that he who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation.²

By establishing these “new orders,” Machiavelli is the first thinker to raise again Protagoras’ ancient credo that a human being is the measure of all things, and so is the progenitor of all modern thought denying the possibility of objective moral standards. Moreover, if Machiavelli is the original modern, he is the original postmodern as well, for he establishes that justice is entirely man-made, whatever the prince says it is. Neither virtue nor justice has any objective foundation, be it in nature, reason, or God. Indeed, there is no justice, no natural law or right, no reason why a ruler should not do whatever it takes to found or preserve his regime.³

Of course, this is not the only possible reading of Machiavelli. Others, to the contrary, claim that Machiavelli does not intend to undermine morality, but only shows that politics is governed by necessity that must conflict with morality, and that any responsible statesman must understand, to use Weber’s formulation, this “tragic conflict.” Machiavelli does not replace classical formulations of justice or virtue with a radically instrumental standard; to the contrary, he still recognizes the difference between how one lives and how one *ought* to live. Unlike Nietzsche, he does not doubt the ideals of Christian ethics themselves, but merely claims that, unfortunately, a statesman cannot guide his conduct by such standards.⁴

Still, regardless of how one reads Machiavelli, from our earlier definitions, it should now be clear that the denials of morality one might find in Machiavelli’s “new modes and orders,” if they are there, exceed skepticism, and would instead be a combination of relativism and nihilism. For to hold that justice is nothing more than what the prince declares, is founded upon the belief that there are no absolute standards, whether based in God or a fixed nature that would circumscribe action. Instead, justice is a standard entirely determined by the prince; he becomes the measure of all things. This of course, is the position of relativism not skepticism. Moreover, to say the prince may act in any way he chooses, that the only standard to judge a ruler be purely one of power, is founded on the belief that nothing is *a priori* forbidden. This position is that of the nihilist, not the skeptic, for it is a dogmatic claim. Again, to recapitulate the definitions from our introduction, the skeptic attempts to remain in a state of doubt, while the nihilist makes the dogmatic step from doubt to the denial of all ethical standards.

A similar linking of skepticism with a politics of domination is also often attributed to Descartes. Descartes leaves the reader with two places to find his moral and political teachings—in a provisional code of eth-

ics, and in several letters describing his thoughts on Machiavelli. Primarily due to this latter interest in Machiavelli—the only political writer to have merited any substantial attention in his writings—it is sometimes claimed that Cartesian skepticism thereby leads to a Machiavellian—understood in the worst sense of the word—politics.⁵ But though Descartes begins his considerations of *The Prince* by praising it for its “many maxims which seem excellent,” his conclusions about Machiavelli reveal a rather different picture.⁶

Descartes does agree with some of Machiavelli’s argument, for example, conceding that it may be advantageous for a prince to do great harm rather than slight in order to avoid revenge. But he does not share Machiavelli’s evaluation of virtue. Faulting Machiavelli for undermining the distinction between gaining power through legitimate and illegitimate means, Descartes warns that such comportment leads to perpetual crime, as “those who have gained power by crime are usually compelled to continue their course.”⁷ Moreover, he maintains that while the prince may follow Machiavelli’s instruction to become a lion or fox as circumstances dictate in foreign policy, this does not mean he should again depart from all ethical standards. Instead, Descartes would forbid the feigning of friendship as a tool of diplomacy as well as the breaking of promises in alliances. His advice to the prince is the rather naive-sounding claim that “it is certain that the best thing is to try always to be good.”⁸ Finally, Descartes concludes that Machiavelli’s perfidy does not even lead to the results it seeks to attain: “it is a sorry thing to make a book full of maxims which at the end of the day cannot even give any security to those to whom they are offered.”⁹

In *Discourse on Method* Descartes is even further away from advocating an absolutist politics. There, Descartes proposes a three-part provisional moral code while science is to work toward an indubitable ethics. First, one is to obey the laws and customs of one’s country—particularly its religion. Second, one ought to act firmly and decisively in one’s actions, and “follow even the most doubtful opinions” once they have been adopted with “no less constancy” than if they had been certain.¹⁰ And finally, one should strive to master oneself rather than fortune, to “change [one’s] desires rather than the order of the world.”¹¹

All of these maxims stem from Cartesian skepticism, but they do not lead to the affirmation of absolutist politics. The first rule, to obey custom, follows from Descartes’s claim that he saw “nothing in the world which remained always in the same state,” and from the corollary fact that his doubts have undermined all his opinions.¹² Consequently, obeying custom becomes the rule by default—for doubt offers no other

guidance for action. The second maxim may seem to be psychologically dubious, but Descartes holds that life demands action and thus skepticism must be suspended in practice, for “we must follow the most probable” when we are unable to distinguish the truth.¹³ Moreover, even if no opinion appears more likely than any other we still have to adopt some, and when we have done so we must “regard them not as doubtful, from a practical point of view, but as most true and certain.”¹⁴ The third maxim is more difficult to link to skepticism. It may seem that Descartes’s espousal of the private and withdrawn life simply follows the ideal of the contemplative life. A private life is the best way to achieve happiness not only because it allows for philosophical reflection, and thus the search for virtue, but also because it most effectively protects from the vagaries of fortune. This is part of Descartes’s reasoning. He writes that the secret of philosophers who were “able to escape the dominion of fortune, and despite suffering and poverty, rival their gods in happiness” lay in their conviction that “nothing was in their power but their thoughts.”¹⁵ Yet this maxim is also connected to Descartes’s skepticism, for his skeptical method hardly makes any demands on the outside world: all that is required is space for quiet reflection. For Descartes, it is possible to be a skeptic under any political regime, and this seems to be the most plausible reason why his comments on politics are as sparse as they are. Or, as he admits in one letter:

I live a life so private, and I have always been so distanced from the management of public affairs, that I would not be more impertinent than that philosopher who wanted to teach what is a captain’s duty in the presence of Hannibal, if I were to attempt to write here the maxims that one is to observe in civil life.¹⁶

For the Cartesian skeptic, then, politics is without importance. Rather than opening the realm of political possibility, this skepticism culminates with a radical withdrawal and indifference to political life. The only way Cartesian skepticism might be related to a politics of domination is by abetting it passively: through indifference and conformance to custom.

Pierre Charron

Descartes is not the only thinker of his age identified as allying doubt with absolutism. His contemporary, Pierre Charron, is also often inter-

preted as deriving similar conclusions from skepticism.¹⁷ Though he is now only known as a minor thinker influenced by his mentor Montaigne, in his day Charron was at least as influential as his teacher, because of his widely read philosophical opus *De La Sagesse*. Charron is particularly interesting for his advocacy of fideism, for connecting more systematically Montaigne's skepticism and antirationalism in order to defend Christian faith. Like Montaigne, he claimed that the weakness of human reason makes all pretension to metaphysical or religious knowledge absurd. But for Charron, reason's frailty also cut in another direction: all arguments denying God's existence are as pretentious as those affirming it. Combining this position with the theologian's contention that God is unknowable because He is infinite, Charron thus had a weapon against all atheists. He could now claim it absurd to deny God, because any such proof must necessarily be so presumptuous as to be worthless.

Charron's use of skepticism is thus diametrically opposed to that of Descartes. Unlike Descartes, who aimed to overturn all uncertainty with the reference point of his famous *cogito*, Charron denies that reason could ever have this role. Instead, all rational supports in the quest for certainty should be abandoned for only faith, and thus the church, can provide the basis for assured knowledge. Nonetheless, despite these differences, Charron, like Descartes, is also often read as an advocate of skeptically inspired immoral politics.

In Charron's case, this is largely due to his elevation of prudence: "the superintendent and guide of all the other virtues."¹⁸ Part of Charron's esteem for prudence comes from his pessimistic view of human nature, one very much resembling that of Machiavelli: human beings are cruel, unreliable, and do not want to be ruled. Prudence is "the art of governing them, the gentle bride which brings them within the ring of obedience."¹⁹ However, Charron's evaluation of prudence is also derived from his skepticism. He contends that the physical world is unknowable because our perceptions are unreliable and radically relative. A similar discordant multiplicity is to be found in moral belief: "there is no opinion held by all, or current in all places, none that is not debated and disputed, that hath not another held and maintained quite contrary to it."²⁰ These uncertainties and inconstancies make prudence all the more important, for the world, like "a sea without bottom or shore cannot be bounded and prescribed by precepts and advice, excepting prudence."²¹

Still, we should be careful before linking prudence with immorality. To be sure, Machiavelli makes it easy to equate it with cunning. For example, in chapter XV of *The Prince*, listing the prince's virtues (among

which, strikingly, justice is not listed), he tells us that the prince can never follow them all, but must know how to choose among them as circumstances dictate; here prudence carries only amoral connotations. But this need not be the case. The classical conception of prudence, as it appears for example in Aristotle, is inextricably tied to justice. It is the art of knowing what course of action is best for oneself and for others: prudence supplies the means while justice offers the end, or as Aristotle writes: “a man cannot be good in the main sense without prudence, nor can he be prudent without ethical virtue.”²²

Which of these two meanings prudence holds today may be disputed, but in Charron’s case he clearly follows the classical understanding, for he is careful to link prudence with justice. Unlike Machiavelli, Charron emphasizes that justice, in addition to piety, courage, and mercy, is one of the necessary virtues of the prince: “one must find abominable those tyrannic and barbarous words freeing sovereigns from all law, reason, equity and obligation.”²³

The ruler has a supreme duty to justice, according to Charron, because he is responsible for the maintenance and cultivation of mores, a responsibility all the more important due to the intrinsic corrupting nature of power. Charron does make exceptions to this obligation. He says that the sovereign’s justice and virtue must be “defined a little differently from those of private men” because of his “great weighty and dangerous responsibility,” and he admits that on occasion the ruler is allowed to deviate from justice: “to sew to the skin of the lion, if it does not suffice, the skin of the fox.”²⁴ But despite these Machiavellian overtones, Charron insists that such measures are warranted only exceptionally, and only for the public good, which is always “the supreme law.”²⁵ More specifically, such deviations are allowed only in defense of the state, not to expand its borders.

On occasion, Charron appears more Machiavellian. For example, he writes that one may

Secretly dispatch and put to death, or otherwise without forme of justice, some certain man that is troublesome and pernicious to the state, and who well deserveth death, but yet cannot without trouble and danger be prevented and repressed by ordinary measures; herein nothing but the form is violated. And is not the prince above forms?²⁶

Nonetheless, though the prince may be “above forms,” he is not above justice, for Charron emphasizes that the ruler may deviate from justice

only in its greater service. On those rare occasions, he must understand his responsibility and act with “regret and unhappy sighs, understanding that it is a tragedy, and a disgraceful blow from heaven.”²⁷ Finally, Charron admonishes that a ruler’s worst error is to think he can act in any way he pleases, for such licentiousness “is the murderer of the prince and the state.”²⁸

These brief historical examples indicate that we should be careful before equating skepticism with a politics unguided by moral concerns. But perhaps they are not compelling. Regarding my remarks on Machiavelli, one can still insist that skepticism may expand the realm of political action. Though Machiavelli’s conclusions may not be skeptical ones, perhaps they still result *from* skepticism. As we observed in our introduction, it is only a small step from doubt to denial, from skepticism to nihilism; we thus might conclude that skepticism directly prepares the way for nihilism by rendering all moral principles uncertain.

One may raise a different objection to my treatment of Descartes and Charron. Although these two thinkers also do not link skepticism with an absolutist politics, this may not be entirely what is at issue. Rather, the more important question is on what grounds they are able to protest against a politics of all that is permitted. For Descartes, one possible limit to the indifference of his skepticism is his faith in the ability of reason to establish a scientific ethics; because of this faith, his moral code of conformance is only *provisional*. In Charron’s case, his skepticism is counterbalanced by religion, and this clearly influences his opinion that politics must be checked by certain moral limits. Charron is skeptical about the capacity of reason to determine moral absolutes, but he does not despair of finding an ethical compass: the church provides it. And so, one may conclude that Charron and Descartes are simply not thoroughly skeptical: Descartes does not doubt that reason will eventually find an indisputable ethics, while Charron leaves unquestioned his own faith in Christianity. To understand the consequences of doubt about both faith and reason, and to better understand how skepticism might turn into dogmatism or nihilism, we must confront Friedrich Nietzsche.

Skepticism and the Politics of Irrational Power

Nietzsche is the most important thinker to demonstrate how skepticism might lead to a politics of irrational power. Because skepticism undermines political and moral principle, one might think it would leave

unchecked force, or in Nietzsche's phrasing, the will to power, the only remaining standard for political action. Yet, again we will be surprised here in our search for illiberal implications of skepticism. For in Nietzsche's case, his skepticism does not lead to such conclusions. Instead, the illiberal excesses in his thought signal a departure from his skepticism—which is motivated and checked by the principle of intellectual honesty—rather than its fulfillment.

In our introduction, we remarked that contemporary discussions of skepticism often seem to neglect its moral component in favor of its epistemological one. Until recently, this exclusive emphasis on the epistemological over the moral has also characterized much of Nietzsche scholarship, particularly interpretations of Nietzsche's perspectivism: it is often explained without considering the moral purpose attending it.²⁹ But Nietzsche insists that in philosophical inquiry—and particularly in skepticism—the moral, not the epistemological, is fundamental. Epistemological questions alone are not important, for “to a purely cognitive being knowledge would be a matter of indifference.”³⁰ Indeed, Nietzsche says he despises “everything that merely instructs me without augmenting or directly invigorating my activity.”³¹ More particularly, in commenting on skepticism, he explains that no “epistemological skepticism or dogmatism ha[s] ever arisen free from ulterior motives” and that its value has always been one of “second rank” to morality. His “fundamental insight” is that skepticism has a “moral origin.”³²

For Nietzsche, this origin has its source in the intellectual conscience. In the introduction to *Daybreak*, he explains that faith in reason is a “moral phenomena,” that subjecting all human experience to the most radical doubt is carried out from moral motivation, and that

We too still obey a stern law set over us—and this is the last moral law which can make itself audible to us, which even we know how to *live*, in this if in anything we too are still *men of conscience*: namely, that in that we do not want to return to that which we consider outlived and decayed, to anything “unworthy of belief.”³³

Later in the same work, he summarizes this teaching with the following aphorism: “If I am now lying, I am no longer a decent human being and anyone may tell me so to my face.”³⁴ Similarly, in his sequel to *Daybreak*, *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche again reaffirms that the intellectual conscience is the only ethical foundation left for humanity: “there is no alternative—‘I will not deceive, not even myself’; and with that we stand

on moral ground.”³⁵ Or, as he repeats later in *Beyond Good and Evil*, the intellectual conscience is “our virtue, from which we cannot get free.”³⁶

This link to the intellectual conscience explains Nietzsche’s esteem for skepticism.³⁷ He emphasizes that “nothing is rarer among philosophers than intellectual integrity,” that the typical philosopher is at bottom a pleader of his own dogmatic prejudices and that, among all philosophers, only the skeptics—particularly the ancient Skeptics—attempt to maintain intellectual honesty. They are “the only honorable type” of philosophers.³⁸ And so, he asserts:

Great spirits are skeptics. Zarathustra is a skeptic. Strength, freedom that is born of the strength and overstrength of the spirit, proves itself by skepticism. Men of conviction are not worthy of the least consideration in fundamental questions of value and disvalue. Convictions are prisons . . . A spirit who wants great things, who also wants the means to them, is necessarily a skeptic.³⁹

Nietzsche also writes that *he* is the most thoroughgoing of all skeptics, that his own writings are a “a schooling in suspicion,” that of all philosophers hitherto: “no one has ever been sufficiently truthful about what ‘truthfulness’ is.”⁴⁰ He proclaims that “at any master who lacks the grace to laugh at himself—I laugh,” insists that “everything unconditional belongs in pathology,” and says he “mistrust[s] all systemizers and avoid[s] them. The will to a system is a lack of integrity.”⁴¹

This integrity has a number of sources. It is consistent with the modern calling of all authority and tradition before the standard of individual judgment, in keeping both with Hobbes’s admonition to “read thyself” and with Descartes’s resolve “to seek no knowledge other than that which could be found in myself.”⁴² Yet, Nietzsche’s emphasis on the intellectual conscience is also significantly different. Hobbes is motivated by a desire to overcome interminable political strife. Descartes is similarly guided by prudential motives, for he fears that morality will be endangered without an irrefutable proof of the existence of God.⁴³ Nietzsche, to the contrary, insists that intellectual honesty has nothing to do with any kind of calculus of utility because illusion is a necessary part of human existence. Truth is “a principle that is hostile to life.”⁴⁴

Instead, Nietzsche’s argument for intellectual honesty finds a closer parallel in Greek thought: in agreement with Aristotle that the individual is a creature who by nature desires to know and with

Socrates' admonition that an unexamined life is not worth living. Nietzsche states:

To stand in the midst of this *rerum concordia discors* (discordant concord of things) and this whole marvelous uncertainty and rich ambiguity of existence *without questioning*, without trembling with the craving and rapture of such questioning, without at least hating the person who questions, perhaps even finding him faintly amusing—that is what I feel to be *contemptible*, and this is the feeling for which I look first in everybody. Something keeps persuading me that every human being has this feeling simply because he is human.⁴⁵

Yet, this emphasis on the intellectual conscience is not only intended as a spur to reflection and concern about ultimate questions. It is also intended to lead to justice, for Nietzsche insists that his perspectivism is fundamentally a way to become more just. By considering more and more perspectives, the individual has a “great method of acquiring knowledge” and so “he raises himself to justice.”⁴⁶ Indeed, Nietzsche claims that the highest stage of morality would be one of “insight” that is able to overcome all partial viewpoints.⁴⁷ For justice is the “opponent of convictions . . . it therefore sets every thing in the best light and observes it carefully from all sides.”⁴⁸

Such a pursuit of justice and truth is also the hallmark of human nobility. Linking justice to knowledge, Nietzsche insists that “only insofar as the truthful man possesses the unconditional will to justice is there anything great in that striving for truth which is everywhere so thoughtlessly glorified.”⁴⁹ He claims that justice is “the highest and rarest virtue” and that when “the exalted, clear objectivity, as penetrating as it is mild, of the eye of justice and *judging* is not dimmed . . . this is a piece of perfection and supreme mastery on earth.”⁵⁰

Nonetheless, despite this praise, Nietzsche's remarks on skepticism are also marked by several ambiguities. First, he is careful to distinguish a skepticism of strength, one tied to an unyielding intellectual severity, from a decadent skepticism reflecting a weakness of will, a lack of strength for decision or action:

The great blood-sucker, the spider skepticism . . . the incurable wretchedness of a heart which is no longer hard enough for evil or for good, of a broken will which no longer commands, *can* no longer command.⁵¹

More importantly, Nietzsche also warns of the dangers accompanying even the strong type of doubting, for any kind of skepticism is always both psychologically and culturally destructive.

According to Nietzsche, all morality is constructed with the help of myths and lies, and so, to live as a skeptic, doubting all moral principles, is exceedingly dangerous:

At bottom every high degree of caution in making inferences and every skeptical tendency constitute a great danger for life. No living beings would have survived if the opposite tendency—to affirm rather than suspend judgment . . . had not been bred to the point where it became extraordinarily strong.⁵²

Indeed, skepticism makes life impossible, for a “person’s happiness is dependent upon the fact that somewhere there exists for him a truth which is *not debatable*.”⁵³ This certainty must be an unqualified allegiance to moral principle, and more importantly, an unshaken belief in a metaphysics, religion, or account of the cosmos: “this is a general law: every living thing can become healthy, strong and fruitful only within a horizon.”⁵⁴ Without such certainty, one is condemned to “a joyless unfruitfulness,” all action reduced to “useless squandering.”⁵⁵ In a world where there is nothing eternal or permanent, “everything is hollow, deceptive shallow and worthy of our contempt.”⁵⁶ Instead, “the enigma which man is to resolve he can resolve only in being, in being thus and not otherwise, in the imperishable.”⁵⁷ For this reason, Nietzsche describes God’s death—the inability of modern humanity to believe in *any* absolute principle Christian or otherwise—as an unprecedented catastrophe.

Nietzsche’s lessons about the ambiguities of skepticism are also self-reflexive. For while he praises skepticism and the intellectual conscience, he also explains that the “formula of his happiness” is “a Yes, a No, a straight line, a goal.”⁵⁸ What he means by this enigmatic statement, is that while the skeptic finds only doubt at the end of all inquiry, this is insufficient for the true philosopher. He has a greater task: “the philosopher demands of himself a judgment, a Yes or No not in regard to the sciences but in regard to life, and the value of life.”⁵⁹ Nietzsche insists that “*actual philosophers . . . are commanders and law-givers: they say ‘thus it shall be!’ It is they who determine the Wherefore and Whither of mankind.*”⁶⁰

These two threads in Nietzsche’s thought—his emphasis on the intellectual conscience, and his insistence that the philosopher has a

guiding role in the creation of values—are distinct.⁶¹ Indeed, the former succumbs to the dogmatism of the latter, as we shall see in examining the main elements of Nietzsche's efforts to overturn and create values—his atheism, his praise of cruelty, and his championing of a politics of domination.

Nietzsche, Atheism, and Cruelty

Nietzsche does link these elements to skepticism. For example, he tells us that skepticism establishes atheism:

The tragedy, however, lies in the fact that one cannot *believe* these dogmas of religion and metaphysics if one has in one's heart and head the rigorous methods of acquiring truth . . . without incurably dirtying one's intellectual conscience and prostituting it before oneself and others.⁶²

Skepticism driven by the intellectual conscience leads to the conclusion that the universe is without any divine order, that "the total character of the world . . . is in all eternity chaos."⁶³ In fact, Nietzsche so often tells us that skepticism leads to atheism that it is very likely that he is the loudest opponent of religion in all of modern philosophy.

But how does Nietzsche arrive at this conclusion? At times, he indicates that faith is undermined by reason, or more particularly, by science. The origins of religion lie simply in ignorance, in "an interpretation of certain natural events, a failure of the intellect."⁶⁴ Here his comments recall Lucretius, who similarly tells us that all religious belief is based on primitive superstition: natural phenomena such as earthquakes, lightning, or eclipses are thought to harbor magical or religious significance only because of scientific ignorance. Science, instead, reveals a universe that is material through and through.

Moreover, atheism also results from the nature of Christianity, which itself ensures that truth will destroy itself. Nietzsche argues that the origins of Christian hope in redemption lie in Platonic faith in the divinity of truth and in its presupposition of a higher cosmic order ensuring harmony between virtue, truth, and goodness. Christianity is merely Platonism made democratic; it is "Platonism for the people."⁶⁵ And while Platonism is the original wellspring of Christianity, it must eventually poison it, for its emphasis on truth leads to a questioning of the Christian divine order, to "intellectual cleanliness at any price."⁶⁶

But though Nietzsche may claim that “unconditional honest atheism” is the “awe-inspiring *catastrophe* of two thousand years of training in truthfulness that finally forbids itself the *lie involved in belief in God*,” we should see that this atheism is in fact, neither unconditional nor entirely honest.⁶⁷ Neither science nor the implausibility of Christianity—if we accept Nietzsche’s elaborate argument for its intrinsic inner contradictions and ultimate subversion—are proof of general atheism. Science leaves the ultimate questions unanswered, while the implausibility of one faith does not by definition establish the denial of all faith.

On rare occasions, Nietzsche himself recognizes these objections. He explains that

Once the belief in God and an essentially moral order becomes untenable . . . because it was considered *the* interpretation, it now seems as if there were no meaning at all in existence, as if everything were in vain.⁶⁸

And he recognizes that though the world seems meaningless does not make it so:

The “meaninglessness of events”: belief in this is the consequence of an insight into the falsity of previous interpretations, a generalization of discouragement and weakness—not a *necessary* belief.⁶⁹

Consistently with his emphasis on a skeptical intellectual conscience, Nietzsche sometimes insists—however, again only rarely—on a modest skeptical inability to answer the question of cosmic order. He affirms that “the total value of the world cannot be evaluated,” that “the world might be far more valuable than we used to believe,” and that “to deny meaning where he sees none” only demonstrates “the immodesty of man.”⁷⁰

Nonetheless, despite these exceptions, the other chief sources of Nietzsche’s atheism are similarly tied to dogmatic ontological and cosmological assumptions. The most important of these is inextricably linked to his critique of pity and concomitant celebration of cruelty. In our introductory discussion of Shklar’s liberalism of fear and the skeptical bases for liberalism, we asked whether skepticism might undermine the belief that cruelty is the worst vice of all. Nietzsche claims that the intellectual conscience forces a confrontation and reevaluation of exactly this position: the holding of cruelty as the worst vice, and pity

as the highest virtue. But how is this critique related to his atheism and how is it based upon skepticism?

Nietzsche explains his motivation for demanding a reevaluation of all morality in the preface to the *Genealogy of Morals*. He says that he began his intellectual odyssey first with “the question of where our good and evil really *originated*” and that gradually this query was transformed into another: “under what conditions did man devise these value judgments good and evil? *And what value do they themselves possess?* Have they hitherto hindered or furthered human prosperity?”⁷¹ From this question, he concludes that esteeming pity is “the *great* danger to mankind,” and that it will usher in an age of nihilism.⁷²

This argument for the necessity of pity is an odd one. To begin with, Nietzsche tells us that pity is a misplaced passion, that the compassionate do not realize that suffering is *necessary*: “it never occurs to [whoever pities] that . . . the path to one’s own heaven always leads through the voluptuousness of one’s hell.”⁷³ But why is suffering so indispensable? Interpreters suggest many answers ranging from Nietzsche’s ostensible callousness, to the importance of Stoicism in his thought, to an Emersonian emphasis on “following one’s way.” Common to many of these readings are various accounts of how pity impedes self-perfection: it underestimates or misinterprets the demands of such betterment; it prevents confrontation with these requirements; or distracts us from this duty entirely.⁷⁴ Still, Nietzsche’s emphasis on suffering seems to be entirely disproportionate with the necessities of self-perfection. Indeed, it seems perverse when compared to, for example, what Plato and Aristotle recommend as the most important tool of education—music. But why, then, is Nietzsche’s road to self-perfection so grimly paved?

To answer this question we have to look further, to Nietzsche’s conception of the soul and the cosmos. Nietzsche claims that the human soul is composed of different competing passions: “with every growth of man his other side must grow too”; and the highest man is the one who “represent[s this] antithetical character of existence most strongly . . . that man must grow better *and* more evil is [the] formula for this inevitability.”⁷⁵ Such an antithesis of passions is fundamental to the great individual for several reasons. First, capacity for extraordinary virtue will also be capacity for extraordinary vice: the best detective would make the best criminal. More strikingly, Nietzsche contends that every soul contains within it these opposite drives and passions, and all human greatness results only from the highest tension and conflict among them. Or, as he explains in his theory of the will to power, what

is basic to the will is not just that it demands an overcoming of all enemies. Far more important than conquest itself is the presence of struggle, for it “can manifest itself only against resistances” and “is never satisfied unless it has opponents and resistance.”⁷⁶

This conception of the human soul is also directly linked to Nietzsche’s denial of a natural moral order in the universe. Truth is ugly. It reveals a world where we are entirely alone unable to find any natural moral standard according to which we might find direction or purpose. Consequently, the human soul can never be in a state of harmony, for only chaos, not harmony, is found in the nature of things.⁷⁷

Given this conception of the soul as one of permanent struggle, and the cosmos as devoid of order, it becomes clear why Nietzsche places such seemingly disproportionate importance on suffering. Happiness—or any kind of harmony of the soul—cannot be the ultimate goal of life for it is supported neither by a rational cosmology nor by the soul that by its very nature lacks concord and thrives on conflict. Instead, Nietzsche agrees with Schopenhauer: “a happy life is impossible: the highest that man can attain to is a heroic one”; happiness is only possible for the decadent, a “herd ideal” for the weak and unreflective.⁷⁸ The greatest curse the Greeks imagined becomes the human ideal: the myth of Sisyphus, continual irresolvable struggle.

This is the world according to Nietzsche. But now it should be clear that this account is not a skeptical one. Despite rare admissions to the contrary, Nietzsche is certain, dogmatically certain, not skeptical, both about the nature of the universe and the nature of the soul. To recapitulate our initial definitions of skepticism, skepticism is only doubt, not denial, about the possibility of rationally justifying moral and political belief. Unlike Nietzsche, the skeptic tries to remain in a state of doubt about ultimate cosmological questions, recognizing that it is impossible to know which account of cosmology is correct—whether there is a divine, rational order, or whether it is purposeless, chaotic.

Nietzsche’s Politics of Radical Aristocracy

We find a similar dogmatism once Nietzsche’s philosophical claims for cruelty’s indispensability are translated into political terms, into that current in his writings advocating a politics of power, and a hierarchical, aristocratic society. It manifests itself in the maintaining of political power through deception; Nietzsche’s aristocrats must ignore any claims of those beneath them, lest they doubt their own right to rule.

In the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche writes that pity is dangerous for “the sick represent the greatest danger for the healthy,” and “call into question and poison most dangerously our trust in life, in man and in ourselves.”⁷⁹ The danger the weak and the suffering spell for the strong nobles is that they will begin to doubt their “right to happiness,” and not merely doubt this happiness, but conclude that “it is disgraceful to be fortunate: *there is too much misery*.”⁸⁰ Consequently, the healthy must be “*segregated*” from the sick to avoid such contamination. The “pathos of distance” Nietzsche claims is needed between higher and lower human beings thus masks an underlying weakness. Similarly, the nobles’ faith in their own value and in their insulation from pity also relies on their caricaturing the weak; pretending that the common masses are so different that they have no right to exist, nor that their suffering need be disconcerting:

When the noble mode of valuation blunders and sins against reality, it does so in respect to the sphere with which it is *not* sufficiently familiar, against a real knowledge of which it has indeed inflexibly guarded itself: in some circumstances it misunderstands the sphere it despises, that of the common man, of the lower orders . . . looking down from a superior height, [it] *falsifies* the image of that which it despises.⁸¹

Elsewhere, Nietzsche admits that “every society has the tendency to reduce its opponents to caricatures.”⁸² He also concedes that this practice of falsification may also apply to his individual theory of the superman: “wherever there is a striving to exalt individual men into the suprahuman, there also appears the tendency to imagine whole classes of people as being coarser and lower than they really are.”⁸³ Moreover, following his theory that the soul demands struggle for its health, he acknowledges that where such conflict is absent, it can be invented: “the fighter tries to transform his opponent into his antithesis—in imagination naturally.”⁸⁴ And so we see that, grounded in foundations of weakness, Nietzsche’s religion of strength does not rest on his other constellation of virtues: skepticism, intellectual honesty, and the demand for justice.

Skepticism and the Limits of Philosophy

Though Nietzsche’s illiberal politics departs from his skepticism informed by an intellectual conscience, and is based upon dogma rather

than doubt, one may still be unconvinced that doubt is in no way allied to a politics of domination. The question remains: If skepticism pronounces doubt about all principles of ethics, how is it able to contain the boundaries of what is politically permissible? Does it not to the contrary, through its corrosive doubt, vastly open up possibilities of political action? Logically, this could be one avenue leading out of skepticism. If nothing is forbidden—interpreting this charitably as only the skeptical claim that it is radically uncertain whether or not anything is forbidden—does this not mean that everything still might be permitted? There is nothing to prevent such a conclusion. But we should note that it is only one possible answer. The other, equally logical conclusion is that nothing is permitted. No principle of justification is available to the skeptic, who thus has no basis on which to act at all.⁸⁵ Which of these two alternatives is followed—whether a politics of all is permitted or nothing is permitted—will depend on the predisposition to justice. If we care about justice, then we will not take the banner of license as our guide. Rather, we will not be able to act at all, or will act with the highest of caution, aware that all principles of action are never final or ultimate ones, but always, as Nietzsche says, our still unrefuted errors.

But can we say anything about which might be the more likely alternative here? If we recall Nietzsche's link of the intellectual conscience to skepticism, and his insistence that this conscience must be tied to a demand for justice, then we can see that, at least in Nietzsche's formulation, his skepticism rejects a politics of irrational power. For one can advocate a politics whereby all is permitted only if one is not concerned about justice.

Still, one may object that this is only an incomplete skepticism, and indeed, only a partial reading of Nietzsche, ignoring his later claim that all phenomena can be reduced to the will to power. What becomes of the demand for justice, and the intellectual conscience, if they are at bottom merely masquerading forms of power? Justice and honesty would no longer be the highest of virtues, but rather not virtues at all, merely tools available for the spread of power. Skepticism would corrode even Nietzsche's virtues.

We might also add that pointing to dogmatism in Nietzsche's account is also insufficient to exonerate skepticism from any association with his illiberal conclusions. This is a similar complaint we earlier posed in examining Machiavelli: though Nietzsche's conclusions may be dogmatic, not skeptical, they may still be certainties arrived *from* skepticism—that is, certainties that doubt has revealed *to be true*, and so are consistent with his account of the intellectual conscience. To answer

Nietzsche, it is not enough to say that his interpretation of human beings and their world is dogmatic. We must go a step further and question its persuasiveness.

But this we can do in a number of ways. We may criticize Nietzsche's account as one that does not encompass all of the springs of human behavior. Nietzsche is not the only philosopher to posit power as the base of all human action. Empedocles also told us that strife is one of the basic elements of the universe. But unlike Nietzsche, he also placed love as its counterweight. Nietzsche, instead, does not seem able to do justice to love; when he does speak of it, he is generally unpersuasive, trying to explain away the phenomena by reducing it, and so distorting it, into simply a desire for power.⁸⁶

More fundamentally, despite his best efforts Nietzsche is not able to separate his own conception of the will to power entirely from ethical concerns. Not only does he claim that the measure of the will to power is the degree to which one is able to be honest, but he also tells us that the will to self-mastery, self-control, and even to tolerance are measures of power.⁸⁷ Moreover, the fundamental purpose of his philosophy is itself inconsistent with his theory of power. At the heart of Nietzsche's thought is a preoccupation with human nobility; Nietzsche wishes to destroy Christian morality and to overturn all values so that a higher human being may flourish. But his rancor against the leveling of humanity is founded on a sense of injustice: an indignation that the noble type is not given his due. Yet, if Nietzsche thought all moral phenomena could be unmasked merely as ones of power, then he would have no reason to complain about the fate of his aristocratic ideal. Because of this inability to free himself from justice and from its demands, Nietzsche himself calls into question his own philosophy that all is solely power.

And so, we find that the philosopher who proposes to be the most radical of all skeptics hitherto, cannot rid himself from a desire for justice. Nietzsche thus leaves us with the following tentative conclusion: skepticism—at least Nietzsche's skepticism—might undermine any final answer to the question of what is justice, but it seems to leave the urgency of asking that question intact.

The Instability of Skepticism

We see that Nietzsche's writings are characterized both by doubt and by unquestioned belief. This is one reason why he invites so many differ-

ent interpretations, ones that seem to be predominantly determined by which pole is ranked as more fundamental to his thought: doubt or dogmatism. In my interpretation Nietzsche moves from the former to the latter; he is a thinker whose celebration of cruelty, affirmation of a chaotic universe, and with it an illiberal politics, is a departure from his own skepticism and standard of the intellectual conscience. Others to the contrary may still emphasize Nietzsche's skepticism as the predominant element. For after all, we know that since the introduction of the notion of criticism in modern thought, philosophy need not oscillate merely between the two poles of dogmatism and skepticism, but instead may strive for a perpetually self-reflexive exercise of open-ended questioning. And so, we may wish to read Nietzsche's seemingly dogmatic statements not as final, but rather as merely provisional positions, always open to the possibility of further critique. Nietzsche is the constantly shifting, jesting, masked thinker who is ever aware of the fragility and incredulity of all belief. Nonetheless, neither the tone nor content of Nietzsche's illiberalism seems to be either tentative or provisional, and for this reason such readings generally tend to aestheticize or privatize his thought, simply discounting its unpalatable implications. Still, whichever way one interprets Nietzsche, this will not affect our general claim that his skepticism—a skepticism fundamentally determined by the intellectual conscience—does not support his illiberal conclusions.

Nietzsche's writings suggest that skepticism is an unstable category, that doubt has a marked tendency to transform itself into dogmatism. We might dispute the intention, self-consciousness, and finality of this dogmatism, but the fact of the instability of skepticism itself seems to be uncontroversial. And so we must then try to account for skepticism's unstable nature, to explain why skepticism has a tendency to turn into varieties of unquestioned belief.